

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-06

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SS-14 SP-02 PM-03 INR-05 EB-03 SAB-01

L-01 PRS-01 H-01 SIL-01 SAJ-01 /040 W

----- 050022

R 041944Z FEB 76

FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6602

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FOR ARA/PAN - MINISTER BELL

EO 11652: N/A

TAGS: PFOR, PN, PINT

SUBJECT: CONGRESSIONAL Q & A'S ON PANAMA; I BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. THIS, THE FIRST OF SEVERAL MESSAGES TO PROVIDE INFORMATION FOR POSSIBLE USE DURING CONGRSSIONAL HEARINGS, PROVIDES BACKGROUND INFORMATION CONCERNING TORRIJOS' GOVERNMENT AND ITS POLICIES. SUBSEQUENT MESSAGES WILL PROVIDE SPECIFIC QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS CONCERNING THE GOVERNMENT'S HANDLING OF DISSENTERS, THE EXILES, ALLEGED "LEFTISM", SUBJECTS IN THE CANAL ZONE POLICE UNION'S LETTER, AND OTHER SUBJECTS.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE REVOLUTION: THE PRE-1968 PANAMA WAS GOVERNED BY A POLITICAL PARTY SYSTEM ESSENTIALLY CONTROLLED BY AND REPRESENTING THE INTERESTS OF AN UPPER-CLASS AGRI-CULTURAL AND COMMERCIAL OBLIGARCHY. THIS SYSTEM WAS IN THE PROCESS OF BREAKING APART AS IT WAS NOT DEALING EFFECTIVELY WITH THE SERIOUS SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC PROBLEMS FACING THE COUNTRY. THESE POLITICAL PROBLEMS WERE COM-Plicated BY THE FACT THAT PANAMA IN 1968 WAS IN ESSENCE TWO COUNTRIES. FIRST, THERE WAS RELATIVELY WEALTHY "ZONE OF TRANSIT" ALONG THE AXIS PANAMA CITY-COLON WHERE OVER

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ONE-THIRS OF PANAMA'S POPULATION WAS CONCETRATED. THE

SECOND "COUNTRY" WAS THE RURAL AREAS WITH NEARLY TWO-THIRDS OF THE POPULATION BUT WITH LITTLE SHARE IN THE COUNTRY'S WEALTH. OVER 50 PERCENT OF THE LANDHOLDERS WERE SUBSISTENCE FARMERS, AND MANY PEASANTS HAD NO LAND OF THEIR OWN. IN ADDITION TO RURAL POVERTY THERE WAS THE GROWTH OF A LARGE URBAN LOWER CLASS, MUCH OF WHICH WAS CONCENTRATED IN SLUMS IN PANAMA CITY AND COLON ON THE BORDERS OF THE CANAL ZONE. EFFECTIVELY THE RURAL AND URBAN POOR WERE EXCLUDED BY THE PRE-1968 POLITICAL SYSTEM FROM PARTICIPATING IN PANAMA'S ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LIFE. THIS LACK OF PARTICIPATION COMBINED WITH THE DISPARITY OF INCOME AND CONCENTRATION OF MASSES OF PEOPLE IN SLUMS ADDED UP TO AN EXPLOSIVE POLITICAL SITUATION ALONG THE BORDERS OF THE CANAL ZONE.

3. MANY PANAMANIANIANS SAW THE NEED FOR A GOVERNMENT PREPARED TO TAKE HARD, CONTROVERSIAL DECISIONS AND ACTIONS TO REFORM THE ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF PANAMA IN SUCH A MANNER AS TO FACILITATE THE INTEGRATION OF THE LOWER CLASS AND RURAL AREAS INTO FULL PARTICIPATION IN NATIONAL LIFE. THE ALTERNATIVES WERE TO LET POLITICAL CONDITIONS DETERIORATE UNTIL THE OVERALL SITUATION ERUPTED IN VIOLENCE, WITH GUERRILLAS, BOMBINGS AND KIDNAPPINGS AS WE HAVE SEEN IN SO MANY OTHER COUNTRIES, OR FOR A STRONG GOVERNMENT TO BEGIN TO MAKE CHANGES THROUGH PEACEFUL MEANS, THEREBY AVOIDING VIOLENT REVOLUTION.

4. THE 1968 COUP AND THE TORRIJOS GOVERNMENT: THE NATIONAL GUARD, LED BY GENERAL TORRIJOS, TOOK POWER OCTOBER 11, 1968 BY MEANS OF A BLOODLESS COUP OUSTING THE FIERY DEMAGOGUE ARNULFO ARIAS FROM POWER. FIRST A PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT WAS ESTABLISHED; THEN ON AUGUST 6, 1972 ELECTIONS WERE HELD TO ELECT A 505-MEMBER NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES (NACR). ALTHOUGH POLITICAL PARTIES DID NOT PARTICIPATE IN THESE ELECTIONS, FIVE CANDIDATES COULD PRESENT THEIR NAMES TO THE VOTERS IN EACH OF PANAMA'S 505 CORREGIMIENTOS (THE SPANISH WORD FOR OUR EQUIVALENT OF LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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COMMUNITIES, WARDS OR BOROUGHES). THE FIRST FIVE PERSONS WHO COMPLETED THE REQUIREMENT OF GETTING SUFFICIENT NAMES OF THEIR NEIGHBORS ON A PETITION SUPPORTING THEIR CANDIDACY WERE THE CANDIDATES WHOSE NAMES APPEARED ON THE BALLOT.

5. AT ITS FIRST MEETING IN SEPTEMBER 1972, THE NACR CONSIDERED AND APPROVED, AFTER MAKING SOME AMENDMENTS,

A CONSTITUTION WHICH HAD BEEN DRAFTED BY A COMMISSION OF 25 PANAMANAIANS DRAWN FROM ALL WALKS OF NATIONAL LIFE AND ALL SOCIAL CLASSES. THE CONSTITUTION CALLED FOR THE NACR TO ELECT A PRESIDENT AND VICE PRESIDENT. IN OCTOBER 1972 THE NACR ELECTED AS PRESIDENT DEMETRIO B. LAKAS, A PROMINENT PANAMANIAN ENGINEER AND BUILDER WHO WAS EDUCATED IN THE UNITED STATES. THE NACR ALSO APPROVED A SPECIAL CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISION (ARTICLE 277) CREATING THE TEMPORARY POSITION OF CHIEF OF GOVERNMENT. THAT POSITION WAS ENDOWED WITH SPECIFIC POWERS AND GENERAL TORRIJOS WAS TO FILL THE POST FOR A 6-YEAR TERM, AFTER WHICH THE POSITION AND ITS SPECIAL POWERS WOULD DISAPPEAR. THE REASON FOR THE NACR CREATING THE SPECIAL POST WAS TO ENABLE TORRIJOS TO CARRY OUT THE OBJECTIVES OF THE PANAMANIAN REVOLUTION. THUS PANAMA IS GOVERNED TODAY BY A GOVERNMENT THAT IS BOTH REVOLUTIONARY AND CONSTITUTIONAL.

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INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SS-14 SP-02 PM-03 INR-05 EB-03 SAB-01

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FOR ARA/PAN - MINISTER BELL

6. THE REFORM PROGRAMS OF THE TORRIJOS GOVERNMENT:
TO RELIEVE POLITICAL TENSIONS AND INCORPORATE THE
LOWER CLASSES INTO PARTICIPATION IN PANAMA'S POLITICAL,
SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC LIFE, TORRIJOS AND HIS GOVERNMENT
BEGAN EXPERIMENTING WITH REFORM PROGRAMS WITHIN THE

OVERALL CONTEXT OF A TWO-PRONGED APPROACH TO CHANGE. FIRST, RECOGNIZING THAT REFORMS COST MONEY, TORRIJOS STIMULATED THE OVERALL GROWTH OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR OF THE ECONOMY BY A SERIES OF MEASURES, INCLUDING:

- A LIBERAL BANKING LAW DESIGNED TO ATTRACT FOREIGN BANKS AND CAPITAL TO PANAMA. TODAY WITH 73 BANKS OPERATING, TORRIJOS HAS SUCCEEDED IN MAKING PANAMA INTO A HEMISPHERIC BANKING CENTER.
- EXPANSION OF THE COLON FREE ZONE.
- PARTICIPATION IN THE GOVERNMENT'S DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS INCLUDING THE MASSIVE BAYANO HYDROELECTRIC PROJECT, ROAD AND SCHOOL PROJECTS, URBAN LOW-INCOME HOUSING AND OTHER SIMILAR PROJECTS, ALL OF WHICH INCREASED THE SIZE OF THE ECONOMY AND THE WEALTH IN CIRCULATION. PANAMA'S GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT - GDP - GREW FROM \$861 MILLION IN 1968 TO \$1,872 MILLION IN 1975.)

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7. THE SECOND PART OF THE STRATEGY WAS TO IMPLEMENT REFORMS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR THE LOWER CLASSES--RURAL AND URBAN. HIS APPROACH WAS PRAGMATIC, EXPERIMENTAL AND NON-IDEOLOGICAL. HIS REFORMS INCLUDED:

- A NEW POLITICAL STRUCTURE BASED ON THE CORREGIMIENTO REPRESENTATIVE WHO IS TO SERVE AS A CHANNEL FOR INTERACTION BETWEEN THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT AND EACH COMMUNITY, AND AS A CATALYST FOR LOCAL DEVELOPMENT.
- LAND REFORM, INCLUDING A SYSTEM OF PEASANT SETTLEMENTS AIMED AT ENABLING THE POOREST PEASANTS TO ENTER PRODUCTIVE WORK. THE PEASANTS JOIN TOGETHER ON LAND PROVIDED BY THE GOVERNMENT. THEY ARE PROVIDED WITH EDUCATIONAL AND HEALTH FACILITIES, PRODUCTION LOANS AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE IN AGRICULTURE.
- A LABOR CODE PROVIDING LEGAL PROTECTION FOR WORKERS, INCLUDING A MINIMUM WAGE, REGULATED WORKING HOURS, OVERTIME PAY, AND COLLECTIVE BARGAINING RIGHTS FOR LABOR UNIONS.
- A SERIES OF RURAL COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTERS WHICH FOCUS ON PREVENTATIVE MEDICINE, NUTRITION EDUCATION, HYGIENE AS WELL AS STRICTLY MEDICAL PROBLEMS.
- A LARGE LOW-INCOME HOUSING PROGRAM TO REPLACE SLUM HOUSING IN THE CITIES AND IMPROVE HOUSING IN RURAL AREAS.
- TIGHTENING UP OF TAX LAWS AND TAX COLLECTION.

THE COMINGED IMPACT OF THESE REFORMS AND THE FUNDING OF THEM HAS IMPROVED CONDITIONS IN PANAMA'S RURAL AREAS NOTABLY. OF GREATER IMPORTANCE HAS BEEN THE REFORMS WHICH GIVE MUNICIPALITIES AND COMMUNITIES, THROUGH THE STRUCTURES CREATED AROUND THE ELECTED

CORREGIMIENTO REPRESENTATIVES A STAKE IN THE POLITICAL LIFE OF THE NATION. BY SHIFTING RESOURCES AND RESPONSIBILITY TO THE LOCAL LEVEL, THE GOVERNMENT HAS MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR PEOPLE IN COMMUNITIES TO SHAPE EVENTS THAT AFFECT THEIR DAILY LIVES, AND BECOME ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS IN PANAMA'S OVERALL DEVELOPMENT.

8. POLITICAL ORIENTATION OF THE GOVERNMENT: TORRIJOS HAS SAID REPEATEDLY THAT HE INTENDS TO CARRY OUT A FUNDAMENTAL RESTRUCTURING OF PANAMANIAN SOCIETY, I.E., THE "REVOLUTION", WITH A MINIMUM OF STRESS, AND WITHOUT LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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ECONOMIC DISLOCATION. HE HAD DISPLACED THE TRADITIONAL UPPER-CLASS OLIGARCHY FROM POLITICAL POWER IN 1968 BUT LEFT INTACT THE ECONOMIC POWER AND WEALTH OF THE PRINCIPAL FAMILY GROUPS. DURING 1968 AND EARLY 1969 HE ALSO BROKE UP THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND FORCED ITS LEADERSHIP INTO EXILE.

9. BUT IN LATE 1969, AFTER PERCEIVING THE TORRIJOS DID INTEND TO CARRY OUT FAR-REACHING REFORMS, AN OPPOSITION GROUP, TOGETHER WITH SOME NATIONAL GUARD OFFICERS, CARRIED OUT A COUP WHILE TORRIJOS WAS ON A VISIT TO MEXICO. TORRIJOS FLEW BACK TO PANAMA AND THE COUP COLLAPSED. FROM THIS EXPERIENCE, HOWEVER, TORRIJOS DECIDED THAT HE WOULD NEED TO KEEP AT LEAST ONE OF HIS POLITICAL FLANKS COVERED, SO HE REACHED AN UNDERSTANDING WITH THE PARTIDO DEL PUEBLO--THE PANAMANIAN VERSION OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY--WHEREBY THE GOVERNMENT WOULD ALLOW THE PARTY TO EXIST AND PERMIT SOME OF ITS LEADERS TO RETURN TO PANAMA IF THE PARTY WOULD GENERALLY SUPPORT HIS REFORM POLICIES. THE GOVERNMENT-LEFTIST RELATIONSHIP HAS BEEN AN UNEASY ONE, BUT ALWAYS WITH TORRIJOS RETAINING THE UPPER HAND. HE ACCEPTED A FEW KNOWN LEFTISTS INTO THE GOVERNMENT, PRIMARILY TO WORK ON REFORM PROGRAMS. ON ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL MATTERS, HOWEVER, HIS GOVERNMENT'S POLICIES HAVE BEEN SHAPED AND EXECUTED BY MODERATES AND CONSERVATIVES.

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INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SS-14 SP-02 PM-03 INR-05 EB-03 SAB-01

L-01 PRS-01 H-01 SIL-01 SAJ-01 /040 W

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R 041944Z FEB 76

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10. TORRIJOS HAS OPPONENTS AND SUPPORTERS ON BOTH THE RIGHT AND THE LEFT. HIS OPPONENTS ON THE EXTREME LEFT ACCUSE THE GOVERNMENT OF BEING ALLIED WITH AND SUBSERVIENT TO THE UNITED STATES. THEY ATTACK THE GOVERNMENT FOR HAVING ACCEPTED THE PRESENCE OF UNITED STATES MILITARY FORCES IN PANAMA UNDER A NEW TREATY. THE OCCASIONAL CRITICISM OF UNITED STATES COLONIALISM BY GOVERNMENT SPOKESMEN, SAY THE LEFTISTS, IS MERELY A SMOKE SCREEN FOR A POLICY OF ACCOMMODATION. THEY CHARGE THAT TORRIJOS IS MAKING PANAMA A CLIENT STATE OF THE UNITED STATES, WHICH IN RETURN HAS ENCOURAGED U.S. BANKS AND BUSINESS FIRMS TO INVEST IN PANAMA AND IS PROVIDING LOANS TO THE PANAMANIAN GOVERNMENT. THE POLITICAL RIGHT, IN TURN, ACCUSES THE GOVERNMENT OF LISTENING TOO MUCH TO THE COMMUNISTS AND ACCUSES THE GOVERNMENT REFORM PROGRAMS OF BEING SOCIALIST IN NATURE.

11. THE TRUTH IS THAT TORRIJOS IS DETERMINED TO ACCOMPLISH BASIC POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REFORMS OF BENEFIT TO THE POORER CLASSES WITHIN THE OVERALL FRAMEWORK OF PANAMA'S PRIVATE ENTERPRISE ECONOMY. HE
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IS MAKING STRUCTURAL CHANGES TO ENSURE BROADER DISPERSION OF THE BENEFITS OF THE ECONOMY. HE HAS CREATED SOME STATE ENTERPRISES--SUGAR MILLS FOR EXAMPLE--THEREBY BREAKING THE MONOPOLISTIC HOLD TWO FIRMS EXERCISED OVER THIS IMPORTANT SECTOR OF THE ECONOMY. BUT HE

DID THIS WITHOUT ATTACKING AND DESTROYING PRIVATE ENTERPRISE. UNTIL THE CURRENT INTERNATIONAL RECESSION STRUCK PANAMA TWO YEARS AGO, THE PRIVATE SECTOR IN PANAMA ENJOYED A GREATER BOOM THAN EVER BEFORE. SOME PERSONS AND GROUPS HAVE BEEN ADVERSELY AFFECTED BY THESE REFORMS AND NATURALLY HAVE MOUNTED OPPOSITION TO THEM.

12. ON SOCIALISM: TORRIJOS, ON THE FINAL DAY OF HIS VISIT TO CUBA, SAID IN A PRESS INTERVIEW THAT WHILE SOCIALISM MIGHT WORK FOR CUBA, IN PANAMA SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE COULD BE ACHIEVED BY A DIFFERENT METHOD. TORRIJOS' SLOGAN "NOT WITH THE LEFT, NOR WITH THE RIGHT, BUT WITH PANAMA" CAPSULIZES HIS POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY.

13. TREATMENT OF OPPOSITION: FOUR TIMES SINCE 1968 THE GOVERNMENT HAS FORCED SOME OF ITS OPPONENTS INTO EXILE ABROAD. THE FIRST INSTANCE WAS IN 1968 WHEN DEPOSED PRESIDENT ARNULFO ARIAS WAS FORCED TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY ALONG WITH SOME OF HIS CLOSEST FOLLOWERS. SOME OF THE LATTER HAVE BEEN PERMITTED TO RETURN, BUT ARIAS HIMSELF REMAINS IN EXILE. SIMILARLY, LEADERS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY, AND SOME LEFTIST EXTREMISTS WHO LAUNCHED A SHORT-LIVED GUERRILLA CAMPAIGN IN 1969, WERE FORCED INTO EXILE. PERSONS WHO ATTEMPTED A COUP IN 1969 ALSO WERE SIMILARLY EXILED. THE MOST RECENT INSTANCE WAS THE EXPULSION, JANUARY 20 OF THIS YEAR, OF 11 PERSONS WHO WERE ACCUSED OF PLOTTING AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT. THE GOVERNMENT HAS INDICATED THAT THEY WILL BE PERMITTED TO RETURN AFTER A SHORT COOLING-OFF PERIOD, REPORTEDLY ABOUT FEBRUARY 26. THIS IS IN KEEPING WITH HIS STANDING POLICY OF REINTEGRATING EXILES INTO NATIONAL LIFE WHEN CONDITIONS CHANGE.

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14. ACTIONS TO EXILE, EVEN IF ONLY TEMPORARILY, PLOTTERS OR OPPONENTS WHO THREATEN THE STABILITY OF A GOVERNMENT CANNOT BE CONDONED, AND THE UNITED STATES HAS MADE ITS CONCERN KNOWN TO PANAMANIAN OFFICIALS. ONE SHOULD KEEP IN MIND, HOWEVER, THAT UNLIKE MANY OTHER GOVERNMENTS, PANAMA DOES NOT HAVE POLITICAL PRISONERS. IT HAS TOLERATED VEHEMENT CRITICISM FROM INDEPENDENT RADIO STATIONS. NEVERTHELESS, DURING THE SIX YEARS IN WHICH HE IS CHARGED WITH IMPLEMENTING THE REVOLUTION, TORRIJOS HAS MADE IT CLEAR HE WILL NOT PERMIT ATTEMPTS TO UNDERMINE OR OVERTURN HIS GOVERNMENT AND ITS REFORM PROGRAMS. HE

DOES, HOWEVER, LISTEN TO CRITICISM AND CONSULT WITH
A WIDE NUMBER OF GROUPS IN ADDITION TO MEMBERS OF
THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF CORREGIMIENTO REPRESENTATIVES.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: REPORTS, US CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS, POLITICAL SITUATION, FOREIGN POLICY POSITION
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 04 FEB 1976
Decaption Date: 28 MAY 2004
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: buchant0
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976PANAMA00837
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760042-0920
From: PANAMA
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19760283/aaaacuwv.tel
Line Count: 390
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION ARA
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: LIMDIS, STADIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: LIMDIS
Page Count: 8
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: LIMDIS; LIMDIS, STADIS
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: buchant0
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 21 JUL 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <21 JUL 2004 by MartinML>; APPROVED <28 OCT 2004 by buchant0>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: CONGRESSIONAL Q & A'S ON PANAMA: I BACKGROUND INFORMATION
TAGS: PFOR, PINT, PN, US
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006